

War in Iraq and military base reuse

By Sam Farr

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Earlier this month, the House Appropriations Committee approved an amendment that you had proposed to legislation that concerns continued funding for military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. What does the amendment entail, and what do you hope it will accomplish?

My opposition to the war in Iraq remains as firm as ever. I've voted against every war funding bill, and I continued that opposition by voting against the House version of the war supplemental on May 14.

But before the legislation even got to the House floor for a vote, there was a lot of work done to make sure the president's planned withdrawal is successful. One important achievement was the amendment I included in the bill to mandate reports on both the goals and progress of our withdrawal from Iraq.

The obvious job of Congress is to pass laws. But an equally important role is that of oversight: to make sure those laws are correctly applied. The amendment I wrote will ensure that Congress knows exactly how the drawdown is progressing.

My amendment directs the administration to provide Congress with quarterly reports on three things: progress by the Iraq government in taking over U.S. military responsibilities; how the drawdown of military forces is complying with the president's plan; and the roles, responsibilities and numbers of remaining U.S. contractors in Iraq.

Iraqis must step in to take over control of their country. They can't do that until U.S. soldiers are gone. And we must make sure there is no shadow presence in Iraq through the presence of loosely monitored contractors.

We're finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, but it's important that Congress proceed carefully. It's vital that we know exactly what's going on in Iraq as we turn control over to local authorities.

You also recently introduced the Defense Communities Assistance Act. Why should communities have more say in the use of lands that are parts of military base closures?

This is a bill that comes from years and years of work reclaiming land on Fort Ord, one of the largest military bases ever shuttered by the U.S. government.

The goal of this legislation is to help communities make better use of land involved in military base closures. The primary tool this bill promotes is the no-cost Economic Development Conveyance.

This tool transfers land to local control at no expense. It was once the main tool used to convey land following a base closure, but has fallen out of favor as the Defense Department tries to extract more money from local governments.

The problem with squeezing locals for more money is one of simple fairness. Taxpayers already gave up these lands so bases could be constructed. Taxpayers then subsidized the construction of the installations. And today, as we're seeing at Fort Ord, taxpayers shell out more to remove toxic and hazardous waste.

But rather than offering this property to local communities that so badly need it for economic development, DoD officials are demanding more, more, more.

We've seen during this economic downturn how important it is to keep our economy growing. Yet we're leaving these enormous parcels of land -- often in prime locations -- undeveloped.

The Defense Communities Assistance Act includes a handful of additional provisions, aimed mostly at ensuring the relationship between federal, state and local stakeholders remain properly defined. But the main objective of this bill is convince the Defense Department that the nation's best interests are served by turning over this land quickly.

The bill won't have a lot of impact on the Central Coast, but our fingerprints are all over it. Fort Ord was one of the first bases shuttered, finally closing its doors in 1994. It's also a great example of how successful a base closing can be. We established California State University-Monterey Bay on the land. More parcels were recently turned over for affordable housing.

Communities were able to turn a devastating economic event into a long-term benefit for the Central Coast, and we hope that success translates into economic development elsewhere.